DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 877 TM 031 522

AUTHOR	Ediger, Marlow
TITLE	Assessing Educational Plans in Uniformity vs. Differences.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	8p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ability; Democracy; Elementary Education; *Group Instruction; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes)

ABSTRACT

There is considerable debate in the educational literature about whether students of similar ability should be grouped together for instruction. Those who advocate keeping students uniform in academic achievement cite advantages to heterogeneous grouping and suggest it is the best way to bring all students to grade-level standards. Democracy as a way of life, however, should emphasize each person's achieving as much as possible, rather than being held to the standards of unifying a group through cooperative teaching. Advocates of grouping students over a continuum of ability stress the importance of respecting individual differences. Reconciling these points of view is a major dilemma in public education. (SLD)

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Assessing Educational Plans in Uniformity vs. Differences

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M. Ediger

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Marlow Ediger

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ASSESSING EDUCATIONAL PLANS IN UNIFORMITY VS. DIFFERENCES

There is considerable debate in educational literature about pupils achieving in a uniform manner as compared to spreading learners out in terms of each achieving as much as possible. Should pupils be kept together in achievement in different curriculum areas regardless of abilities or should there be a spread of academic achievement due to different abilities of involved learners? This is an issue that needs reflection, contemplation, and analyization.

Uniformity of Achievement

Those who advocate keeping pupils together and uniform in academic achievement advocate the following:

1. heterogeneous grouping of pupils. With mixed achievement levels in a classroom, the more talented/gifted may assist the others to learn as much as possible. Fast learners then become mentors for slower achievers. Heterogeneous grouping is more democratic as compared to homogeneous grouping. Thus, regardless of abilities possessed, pupils interact with each other, as do individuals in society (See Ediger, 1994, 20-34).
2. narrowing the gap in achievement. With the gifted/talented assisting the slower achiever, the gap is narrowed between the two groups. It gives the slower achiever a chance to catch up with the talented/gifted pupils. Socio-economic levels should not be used as an excuse for having the huge achievement gap between the fast and slow achievers. There is no reason for this gap to be in evidence even though wealth possessed among families differs much.
3. high standards and expectations. With high academic standards as objectives for all pupils to achieve, the gaps between the fast versus the slow learners should be narrowed greatly. Teachers have had low expectations for slower learners and that is a major reason why they have not achieved well. High expectations for academic achievement should be the lot of all pupils, not just the talented and gifted.
4. sophisticated knowledge for all pupils. Sophisticated knowledge should be taught not to talented and gifted learners only , but also to all pupils. The sophisticated knowledge is needed by all learners now as well as in the future. Simple levels of knowledge taught to slow learners only assists these pupils to remain far behind their counterparts.
5. good teachers make the difference in academic achievement. With good teaching, the gap can be narrowed/eliminated between the fast versus the slow learner. Good teachers are able to motivate and encourage pupil achievement and progress.

6. cooperative learning needs to be stressed in teaching and learning situations, not individual endeavors.Cooperative learning emphasizes pupils working together harmoniously to achieve objectives of instruction. The group working together achieves objectives. Each pupil may contribute his/her talents/time to achieve optimally in a cooperative learning endeavor. Team teaching also needs to be stressed whereby involved teachers plan the objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation procedures collectively. By working together, the team of teachers presents a good model for pupils to emulate.

7. school bankruptcy laws may make it possible for all pupils to achieve. Those schools with low achievement might be taken over and operated by the state. Generally, the lower socio-economic level of pupils have achieved at the lowest level in academic achievement. If pupils are not taught well, they cannot achieve adequately. School bankruptcy laws motivate teachers to teach better so that all achieve stated objectives.

8. voucher plans make it so that dissatisfied parents with low public school achievement involving their offspring may send their child to a private school whereby academic achievement may be raised. The child will then achieve at a more optimal rate and gaps might be narrowed between children from rich versus poor socio-economic environments. Voucher money goes from the sending public school to the receiving private school.

9. charter schools provide another alternative to the public schools. Parents dissatisfied with achievement of their offspring in the pubic schools may select a charter school. The charter school might use building space from the public schools, but they are freed from the red tape of state and local regulations.

10. special at risk programs have been conducted in the pubic schools with the intent of bringing potential dropouts and low achievers up to where the others are achieving.

Much effort then is going into attempts at bringing pupils up to grade level standards. Anther way of expressing ideas here is that pupils are to be somewhat homogeneous in achievement. The J. E. B. Stuart High school, Fairfax, Virginia has as a very high goal in that <u>all</u> 11th graders read on grade level (Checkley, 2000, 5). Again, the question arises as to how high should the bar be set for pupil achievement. Additional questions are the following:

1. should gifted/talented pupils have as their only goal to assist those of lesser achievement to catch up?

2. can the gaps truly be narrowed with the diverse socio-economic levels in evidence as well as those with low achievement?

3. will there not be a greater spread of achievement from high to low when <u>individual</u> differences are adequately provided for in the

classroom?

4. is it realistic for all to achieve high standards as well as every pupil meeting the high expectations of teachers?

5. can slower achievers master the "sophisticated knowledge" that the more talented/gifted understand or will this waste time in attempting to achieve what is too difficult?

6. can good teaching truly narrow the gap in achievement or are there many other variables involved, such as socio-economic advantages?

7. can school bankruptcy laws, vouchers, and charters help slow learners to catch up in achievement with the others, or are there too may children on the poverty level, such as 20%?

8. does attempting to raise test scores of pupils make for a better education or are there many other valuable learnings to be accrued beyond that of results from testing?

9. are state and federal level legislators blaming teachers for ills in the public schools that the economic system in the United States has? For example, regressive taxes should be eliminated. Then too, pupils in higher socio-economic areas do better on tests than do the others.

10. is too much money in the public schools spent on helping pupils "catch up" with little emphasis placed upon each pupil learning as much as possible? The latter is the most important idea. Each pupil in a democracy should achieve optimally (See Ediger, 2000, 61-63).

Emphasizing Differences in Achievement

When attending graduate school on the doctorate level 1961-1963, the psychology of learning stressed that in the first grade, there would tend to be a range of achievement of four academic years. Thus, the first graders, age six, would have a range of from four years to eight years of age in academic progress and growth. With good teaching, this range would be doubled to eight by grade six (age twelve). Thus, academic achievement would have a range of from grade two to grade ten. Perhaps, this meant reading from the grade two to the grade ten level. Pupils then will spread out further depending upon their abilities, quality of teaching, and so on. No professional educator should recommend holding selected groups of pupils back in academic achievement due to making for more equality among learners.What each learner can achieve optimally should be the guideline for all teachers to use.No one should be forced to achieve beyond what is possible, nor should any learner be held back in academic achievement so others can catch up.

Democracy as a way of life should emphasize each person achieving as optimally as possible and not be held to the standards of unifying a group through cooperative learning. Advocates of spreading pupils out on a continuum whereby each learns as much as possible

stress the following plans of teaching and learning:

1. gifted/talented pupils should have a curriculum of their own to achieve and not be made to help other learners only. This allows time for the gifted/talented to assist those of lesser abilities.

2. multiple intelligences theory should be used in which pupils individually may indicate what has been learned through the intelligence(s) possessed and not through test results only (See Gardner, 1993).

3. there needs to be a balance between homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping of pupils in the classroom. Thus, pupils may work with those of somewhat like abilities and talents as well as those who differ.

4. opportunities for vocational education should be provided. There should not be feelings of superiority for academic learnings as compared to vocational education. The author took three years of vocational education in high school, was president and vice-president of the Inman, Kansas Future Farmers of America Chapter, as well as received the rank of State Farmer, open to two per cent of FFA membership within a state. He also received an agricultural scholarship to Kansas State Agricultural College, now named Kansas State University, as well as being third high in the state in judging livestock, among FFA members, in 1946.

5. to focus on the academics only, will not benefit enough of the school population. These learnings will be forgotten by many, even if mastered at a given time. A nation also needs good automobile mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians, among other vocations. Who is to say which are the most important jobs, professions, and vocations? There are times when the author needed a plumber most and at other times an electrician or plumber, depending upon the situation. All pupils, K-12, need to experience the world of work. What is experienced should be safe, goal centered, useful, motivational, and positive. The lines between the academic world and the vocational need to be blurred; both are honorable as concepts to implement.

6. individual differences should be respected as being a worthwhile concept and not have everyone become a uniform being in a single field such as in academic achievement. Why? Individuals differ from each other in many ways. Being raised in a General Conference Mennonite Community, the author felt the pressure to become a farmer and almost did; farming has had a long standing tradition of being superior to other fields of occupational endeavors. However, even with this long standing tradition, there were, early on, a few successful football and basketball coaches, medical doctors, managers of businesses, teachers, school administrators, and professors, but not lawyers. But, this has changed much. Presently, an increasing number are in the field of law, along with many other kinds of professions and

work. Culture is a powerful factor in assisting to determine what a person will do in life!

7. test results are not the only way to reveal what has been learned. In fact, no worker in society indicates knowledge and skills through testing. Rather, the worker reveals competency at the work place through actions, doing, participating, producing, and processing, among other ways. Difference in achievement are noticed due to workers achieving at their very own unique rate of attainment.

Portfolios with its constructionist philosophy has challenged test results as being the sole determiner of pupil progress. Portfolios show the actual work performed and completed by a learner. Test scores are numerals and do not indicate specifically how well a pupil is doing, for example, in writing/composing a letter to be mailed. Pupils individually with teacher guidance develop portfolios. Individual differences may be great among the different developed portfolios due to diverse achievement levels of learners.

8. pupils differ in interests possessed, for example, when choosing library books to read, Pupils then select those that are on their individual levels of reading so that comprehension is possible. Then too, that which is of personal interest is chosen as reading materials. Interests cannot be dictated to the learner but are intrinsic. The teacher must attempt to broaden learner interest in topics for reading selections. But it is the pupil who makes selections of library books which meet personal interests for sequential reading (Ediger, 2000, 16-19).

9. project methods of instruction stress the importance of pupils individually choosing the purpose of a project to be pursued. The pupil plans how the purpose is to be carried out. After carrying out the purpose, the pupil with teacher guidance develops criteria to use in assessing the quality of the project. The teacher becomes a guide, advisor, and motivates pupil learning.

Projects developed collaboratively need adequate input from each individual on the team. Individual achievement is evaluated within the committee. Otherwise, a few may do all the work with some receiving credit for doing very little. Individual differences are very important in group work also, in addition to individual tasks and endeavors. Respect for each contribution is of utmost importance (Ediger, 2000, 10-12).

10. strengths within the pupil need to be assessed and used to achieve more optimally. It may be that a learner needs to compensate for a weakness possessed, such as dyslexia. Even then, the pupil perceives his/her strengths so that any deficiency may be minimized.

Conclusion

How uniform a group do educators want and desire when teaching

heterogeneously grouped pupils? How might this uniformity be achieved? Who is to be held back and who is to be assisted to achieve at a higher rate?

How much differentiation should there be from high to low achievers?Should this gap be increased, based only on what any one pupil can achieve optimally? How can each pupil be aided to learn as much as possible?

Might these two philosophies/psychologies be harmonized so that democracy as a way of life receives the utmost attention?

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